

## PROPER 15, PENTECOST 12, YEAR A, AUGUST 20, 2023

How many of you here this morning have been excluded from something that you really wanted to belong too? I have no doubt that everybody here has experienced some kind of rejection for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons encompass gender, race, social status, religion, sexual orientation and the list goes on and on. We all know what it's like to be on the outside looking in.

Throughout world history, our country's history, the history of the church people have and still are excluded for various reasons. The story of the Canaanite woman in today's gospel is a story about people on the outside looking in and being very much aware that they do not belong. It is a text where those on the inside make sure that the outsider stays where he/she belongs.

It is something we are very adept at doing ourselves even if we've felt we've been on the outside. It's funny but somehow when we're on the inside of whatever group we belong too, it is so easy to fall prey to excluding others. We all have prejudices and those prejudices have a way of coming out when we least expect it sometimes.

Even Jesus fell prey to the prejudices of his time. Don't forget Jesus was also fully human and we often forget that aspect of him. He is as fully human as he is fully God. But even Jesus had to grow his way into a comprehensive, all-inclusive understanding of being the son of God and what God's inclusivity really meant. That means he was subject to all the things we are and, yes, he struggles, snaps, discovers, grows, falters, learns, fears, and overcomes. Jesus is not only really human he's authentically one of us. The humanity of Jesus show us what it means to grow as a child of God. He embodies what it looks like to stretch into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God's kingdom.

In today's gospel, the Jesus we encounter in this moment is fully human and is a product of his time and place, shaped as we all are by the conscious and unconscious biases, prejudices, and entitlements of his culture. He knows he's meant to share the Good News but he struggles to recognize if the Good News is for everyone and not just God's chosen. He hasn't yet considered who it leaves out. Even Jesus has to learn how radically good the Good News is.

Make no mistake when Jesus tells the woman it isn't right to take food away from the children and give it to the dogs he is referring to the Canaanites as dogs. It is a highly inflammatory and prejudicial racial slur.

So, in this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, Jesus himself must face his own blind spots, rudeness, prejudice, and allow himself to be opened to the full and uncomfortable implications of God's good news. That's just what this Canaanite woman does. This Canaanite woman schools him. Turning his slur right back at Jesus who insults her, she replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

It's a brilliant response which also cuts to the very heart of Jesus's ministry up to this point. After all he's been eating with tax collectors and prostitutes. He's the rabbi who breaks bread with sinners. His disciples are the ones who earn the Pharisees' contempt for eating with unwashed hands. All his actions have been about breaking

boundaries, busting taboos and destroying divisions as Jesus shows the chosen who God is around the communal table.

And so the table is precisely where the outsider, the Gentile, the outcast, the "other," calls Jesus out. As if to say, "Lord, where's my Good News? Where's my place at the table? When will your goodness be good enough for me and for my daughter?"

I like to imagine this scene in my mind and I see a full moment of stunned silence in the wake of the Canaanite woman's words. How dare this foreigner, yet alone a woman speak to Jesus like this. But there comes a time when enough is enough of being excluded because of your nationality, the color of your skin, your religion or whatever and you want to be treated just like everyone else. I also imagine going through Jesus's mind and heart is the impact of her words: "If you are who you say you are, how can you be content while anyone goes hungry in the vicinity of your table? The good news is here and I know it's here; you already have it." She invites Jesus to look harder, push harder and to see that there's enough of God's good news to go around. She pushes Jesus to expand the circle, dissolve the boundaries, widen the table and preach the good news to her.

Here's the best part of recognizing the human Jesus is that he accepts the instruction of the woman who challenges him. He allows her to school him in his own understanding of the Good News and to break the barrier of his prejudice, and widen the circle of his compassion. Interestingly, we never see Jesus lose a verbal contest with anyone else in Scripture yet he concedes the argument to an audacious, female foreigner: and his amazement is felt in what he says. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

The author and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes the moment this way: "You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do." The Canaanite woman's faith and persistence teach him that God's purpose for him "is bigger than he had imagined, that there is enough of him to go around."

What would it be like to follow in the footsteps of a Jesus who listens to the urgent challenge of the other? What would it be like to insist on Good News for people who don't look, speak, behave, or worship like we do? It's not good news if it's good just for me, or for the people who look and think like me, or for the people I already happen to like and love. Is it Good News for the starving and the incarcerated and the unemployed and the homeless? Is it Good News for the immigrant? Is it Good News yet for the people we've been conditioned all our life to ignore?

In the kingdom of God there are no boundaries, only welcoming committees. When we really focus on the outsider, when we look for them we will discover that the kingdom of God has come to us. When we welcome the outsider into relationship we discover how much they have to teach us about faith and love, and we are richer for it.

There is a story about Mahatma Gandhi who had intently studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was seriously exploring becoming a Christian. He discovered a small church where he was living in South Africa studying the law. When he approached the church one Sunday he was barred from entering it because of the color of his skin. This infamous incident forced Gandhi to never again consider being a Christian, but rather adopt what he found in Christianity and what Jesus preached.

When asked why he rejected Christianity he replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ."

We humans keep on drawing circles where only "me and mine" belong. The circles, some people think, will keep us safe. The circles will keep "them" out -- whoever they may be. But the funny thing is God keeps drawing bigger circles. God's circles are not meant to keep out anyone. God's circles are meant to invite people in. And isn't that a good thing for all of us? We are not to be protective of some special, self-appointed position. We are to look for those who feel excluded and remove that which makes them feel excluded.

One more story that gets to the heart of this story. After working non-stop on the difficult work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was in New York, having chemotherapy for prostate cancer. He was asked, "Archbishop, what have you learned from your cancer?"

With a deep pensive look in his eyes, he said, "I have learned that life is too short to be filled with so much hatred. I don't think we realize how much time we waste on hate until the end, when we can't get the time back."

Remember, Jesus himself learned what it meant to widen the gates and throw open the doors to welcome the voice of a despised foreigner. With Jesus as our model we are called to step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves, not because we have to, and not because we ought to, or even because we want to, but because we know that it is God's own self who waits for us on the other side in that other person. May we have the power, resolve and grace to take this lesson to heart, and work to show those on the outskirts the power of God's love, acceptance and truth. Amen.